

One Day by kittenCorrosion

Series: [the name of the game \(stranger teens 2.0\) \[1\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Christmas stuff, Cuddling, Emotional Comfort, F/M, Father-Daughter Relationship, Fluff, I don't know what to tag this, Innocent, Plenty of Fluff, Post Season 2, Sharing a Bed, Slice of Life, he and hop are a hoot, it's a sleepover, it's cute i guess, it's light on the angst, just read it i suck at this, lots of awkward!mike, more fluff than angst I promise, protective!hopper, teenage love angst, the longest one shot ever, this couldn't be more innocent if it tried idk

Language: English

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Relationships: Eleven & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Eleven/Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

“Would you be able to keep your mouth shut and not come back unless I very specifically told you it was okay? No showing up randomly under any circumstances? Even if she begs and cries and threatens to float you out of your bed or melt your brain or something?”

He glanced at El with narrowed eyes and she tried to look innocent, like the thought of manipulation had never crossed her mind. Hop knew better.

“Y-Yes, sir.”

“Then this just might work.”

~

It's a sleepover at the cabin, with awkward tension, sweet fluff, and Christmas cheer.

One Day

Author's Note:

the title of this story in my drafts is "cabin sleepover teenage angst shitfest" and it took me three hours to think of something better that's still pretty shitty lmao. this was one of the fics i started pretty much the day after i watched season two but i couldn't finish to save my goddamn life. finally finished it. yee haw.

i haven't had time to read a whole lot of other fics but i'm pretty sure i saw this mike-sleepover-cabin idea posted by someone else but whatever i think it's a cute and i'm glad i'm not the only one who had the idea lol.

uhhhh sorry it's kind of christmas-y but i've been listening to christmas music since halloween ended and i was kind of in the mood.

also a quick thank you for all of the AMAZING comments on my last story. ya'll have me crying tears of joy and i'm not even kidding i literally cried a few times. i'm sorry i haven't been responding but i've been so busy and i have over a hundred messages in my inbox and i'm a little stressed but don't think i haven't read your comment because i did and i made ugly noises while doing so.

fuck i love you guys.

El rolled over on her double bed, onto her stomach, chin resting dreamily against her pillow as she held the Supercom up to her ear, listening to the familiar voice. Her favorite voice.

“—and Mr. Clarke was talking about how gross our stomachs are when they digest and the acids dissolve all your chewed up food—”

It had been a two weeks since the Snow Ball and since Hopper had shown her the birth certificate and explained how she would need to stay hidden for another year. She had cried, her heart aching at the thought of being separated from everyone she had only just reunited with, but then her new father had pulled a familiar looking walkie-talkie from his jacket pocket and held it out to her.

"I know, kid, it's not going to be easy. But now that the bad men aren't listening in all the time you can talk to your friends as much as you want. You just have to stay here until the doc tells me it's safe," Hopper had rumbled as she took the Supercom from his hands. "Maybe it won't be as long as he thinks."

"I can talk to them?"

"As much as you want..." he'd nodded agreeably, then frowned. "I mean, before bedtime. Don't stay up all night, okay?"

She'd immediately run to her room and sat cross-legged on the bed, dialing to the right channel and giving it a nudge with her mind so the signal reached. Technically she didn't need the Supercom to communicate, but it made it a lot easier and didn't drain her as much since it had a direction connection unlike the TV static.

It had only taken one call for him to answer.

"Mike?"

A pause of silence. Then static. Then the voice, loud and clear and full of excitement.

"*El?* Is that you?!"

"Yes. Hopper says I can't visit because it's still dangerous," she found sentences came easiest to her when she was talking to Mike. "But he gave me this. So we can talk." She remembered the one rule. "Before bedtime."

"Oh... I can't see you?"

He'd sounded sad and she winced at the tug she felt at her heart. But she had to stay a secret and then she would be free.

“You can. In a year.”

“Three hundred and sixty-five days,” his voice had sighed.

It was the official countdown, not “soon” or “someday” and she smiled at the feeling of certainty and the honesty she had seen in her new father’s eyes. 365 days. She knew she and Mike would make it. Especially since they were allowed to communicate now.

In the two weeks since then they talked every day, after Mike got back from school and sometimes later too. She would sit around, occasionally glancing at the Supercom where it sat next to her, waiting for his voice to call her name, checking the familiar calculator-watch on her wrist. Sometimes he would have to wait until after dinner and she would feel like she was going crazy, but every day they would end their conversation with how many days.

So far it was only fourteen. Finding that discouraging, they’d starting counting down, making it three hundred and fifty-one.

“—but I might get a new one for Christmas so I—”

“Chriss... muss?” she interrupted.

“Christmas? It’s... it’s like the best day of the year. When you have a tree and a ton of presents you get to open—”

“Presents?”

All of it was unfamiliar. She’d missed Christmas by about week, when she had still lived out in the woods. Hopper hadn’t found her quite in time and she hadn’t even really seen it on TV. It was a totally new concept.

“Presents? When someone gives you something and doesn’t necessarily expect something back. You get them from friends and family usually.”

“Like your watch?”

He’d given her his calculator-watch for good, so she would know the time he would call her, having dropped it off at the Police station for

Hopper to take to her. It was the only thing she could think of.

“Yeah, that was a present. You get them on your birthday and Christmas and sometimes just because. From people you like and stuff.”

“And... with a tree? For... Christ-mas?”

“Yeah! You decorate the tree with like lights and ornaments and then put the presents under it. You wrap with them pretty paper and you get to tear it off on Christmas morning. My mom always gets me cool stuff and my grandma gets me sweaters and socks but it’s still really exciting to see what you get.”

“It’s... fun?”

“Super fun! Maybe—” there was a pause and she could imagine his leg jiggling up and down as he thought. “Maybe you could come to my house for Christmas? I, um, I have presents for you anyways and it’s next week—”

Her heart sped up but then dropped. There was no way she would be able to leave and go over there, especially not in front of his parents. Hopper wouldn’t allow it.

“I can’t, Mike,” she said softly.

Silence.

“I know... I just hoped—I haven’t seen you,” an exhale. “I miss you.”

“I miss you too. I want to see you.”

“Maybe... what if I came there? Would that be okay? Just for a bit. I won’t tell anyone where you are, I would *never* tell. Ever.”

She hadn’t thought of that. No one had been allowed to visit because they couldn’t risk the bad men finding out where the cabin was. But Mike... Mike was right. He would never tell. He would never put her in danger. He didn’t want to lose her again. He was safe.

She sat up, pressing the button to talk.

"I'll ask Hopper. Be right back."

"Wait, right *now*? El, that's not—"

She dropped the Supercom onto her pillow and got up, ignoring the sputtering coming from it and walking out into the living room where Hopper was slouched on the couch, watching some cop show and drinking a beer.

"Hopper?"

"Hm?" he glanced at her, sitting up a bit. "What's up, kid?"

"Can Mike come here? I want to see him."

He sat up straighter, his brow getting even more wrinkled as he stared at her and realized she was serious. He let out a loud breath, knowing this wasn't going to be an easy thing to refuse. Not after keeping them apart for so long.

"Kid, you know that's—"

"For Christmas," she quickly butted in. "As a... present."

"He can't come *on* Christmas, El. His parents would think it's weird that he wants to spend a holiday with the Chief of Police. Way too risky."

"Not Christmas. But... soon."

"El..."

"Please? He won't tell. He's good."

"I know but—"

"*Please.*"

He stared at her large eyes, edged with desperate tears, and let out another heavy sigh, setting his beer down to sit up straight. Mike's sister knew where this place was, and Joyce and Jonathan. At this point he was more worried about the kids accidentally saying

something and giving away that El existed and where she was more than he was worried about anyone discovering it. They had big mouths which was the main reason they were kept at a distance. But he knew she was right about Mike, that kid would let himself be tortured to death before he gave her up. Hop had seen the look in his eyes when they'd left to close the gate. The desperation and fear. He couldn't forget it.

Scratching the thinning patch of hair on the back his head he weighed the options. Mike had let him know how he felt about Hop lying and in a way he kind of felt like he owed the kid this one. And El was looking at him with her brows furrowed in worry, eyes huge and rimmed with hope.

Something in his heart gave in—he couldn't crush that hope—and he sighed again. It was almost Christmas after all... maybe a little miracle could happen.

“Go get that super-talkie thing,” he told her.

She did, scampering back quickly, holding the Supercom in her hands, feeling breathless with anticipation at what he was going to do and say. It was obvious that he was starting to give in and it made her excited.

“Okay, uh, make sure he can hear,” he said.

“Mike?” she talked into the walkie-talkie.

“El! What did he—”

“Wheeler. Can you hear me?”

“Oh, um, hi, sir. Yeah.”

Since when did he start calling me sir? Hop almost snorted. *He must be desperate.*

“El says she wants you to come and visit as her... Christmas present. Did you tell her what that was? I sure as hell didn't.”

“Um... yeah. Sorry?”

"Hmph," Hop grumped. "She says it's all she wants and to be honest, I don't like it. You kids talk too much and you know she has to lay low for another—"

"350 days," Mike interrupted.

"Yeah, sure, until next year. But you're pretty smart honestly, so if I allowed you to come here, would you be able to keep your mouth shut? You can't show or tell any of your other little friends."

"Yes!" It was almost a shout.

"Even if the damn police show up and try to torture it out of you?"

"Aren't *you* the police, sir?"

Hopper grinned. This kid was smart.

"Would you be able to keep your mouth shut and not come back unless I very specifically told you it was okay? No showing up randomly under *any* circumstances? Even if she begs and cries and threatens to float you out of your bed or melt your brain or something?"

He glanced at El with narrowed eyes and she tried to look innocent, like the thought of manipulation had never crossed her mind. Hop knew better.

"Y-Yes, sir."

"Then this just might work," he gave in, glancing at El again. "Can you say you're sleeping at the Byers' and I can pick you up from there?"

Her eyes flew wide with disbelief. It had worked? Mike could come? She could see him?

She didn't wait for Mike to answer, throwing herself at her new father and wrapping her arms around his neck in an excited hug. There was a similar whoop of triumph from the Supercom and then she heard Mike saying yes over and over again excitedly. Hop's large hand rested against her shoulders blade and he gave her a squeeze,

softening under her affectionate arms.

“Alright, alright. You two can pick the night. *But—*”

El pulled back to meet his eyes, hearing the seriousness in his voice. Hop looked stern, eyebrows raised, a finger pointing to illustrate just how serious he was.

“He sleeps on the couch and you two have to be asleep at the usual time. You’re not breaking your schedule just because you have a visitor, alright? And you’re going to have help me clean this place up too. It’s a mess...”

“My mom will send me with a casserole. She does that sometimes, for Mrs. Byers,” Mike chimed in, El’s finger still pressing the talk button so he could hear everything. “Would that be okay, sir?”

“Casserole sounds great. Pick a night so I can make sure to have Flo remind me something is happening or I’ll forget to pick you up.”

They settled on the next Friday night, two days after Christmas, and El gave him another hug before retreating back to her room and settling on her bed again, a huge smile lighting up her face as Mike chattered excitedly about bringing some card game called Uno and his presents for her. Her heart felt like it would burst she was so excited.

The next eight days—she was counting them of course—went by slowly as she paced the cabin, keeping it obsessively clean, grumping at Hop when he got crumbs on the floor and quickly sweeping them into the trash. He’d brought Christmas lights and they strung them around the cabin, making it look more cheery.

He had given in and even brought a tiny tree that barely fit into the corner, digging an old box of ornaments and tinsel out and setting it next to the tree but telling her to wait. The last thing he did was show her how to make cookies. Plain old chocolate chip that she chomped through and they both sat in front of the TV and watched White Christmas with Bing Crosby while sipping hot chocolate.

She noticed he seemed a little less grumpy, his arm around her

shoulder as she leaned against him. Christmas, whatever it was exactly, was fun and she wished it happened more than once a year so they could do this again. Maybe there were other days like Christmas? She would have to ask Mike.

“I’m heading over to Joyce’s,” Hop was standing by the door, holding his hat and wearing his jacket to fight of the December cold. “I’ll be back soon but *listen for the knock*, okay?”

“Yes.”

Waiting for Hop had always been hard. When he didn’t tell her he would be late and she would find herself staring off at the door, the food getting cold. But it was even harder now knowing that *Mike* was going to be there soon.

She paced. She couldn’t help it, the hum of the TV not enough to distract her from the impending reunion. Talking on the Supercoms helped, but this was... unbearable, complete and utter torture and—

Tap tap.

Tap.

Tap tap tap.

She flew across the room, slamming the locks open with her mind and almost ripping the door off it’s hinges as she pulled the knob. Hop still had his fist raised, eyebrows up as he stared down at her. His solid frame filled the space and she felt a bolt of fear.

Could he not come? Did someone find out?

Her heart sped up and she opened her mouth to say something but Hop stepped to the side before she could make words happen, moving out of the way so she could see the smaller person hidden behind him.

“Mike!”

He was a marshmallow, his winter coat zipped up to his chin, a scarf wrapped around his throat, a light dusting of snow in his black hair,

but his smile was unmistakable. His eyes widened but he didn't get a chance to respond as she threw herself at him, staggering a bit as he wrapped his mittened arms around her.

It was cold outside, his parka chilly against her shirt, but she was warm and her hands gripped him and pulled him close, her cheek pressing against his. He didn't hesitate, his arms surrounding her and holding her tightly to him, his breath fogging the chilly air and warming her ear.

"El," his voice was low and he sighed in relief, "I missed you."

She pulled back, so their noses were almost brushing, their breath mingling as her light eyes met his dark ones, her heart fluttering. His hands were solid, against her upper back and she tilted her head, leaning closer—

"Alright, you two, get inside. It's freezing out there."

Hop's hand pulled her back but not out of Mike's grip and she saw Mike flush, his cheeks reddening but not from the cold. Reluctantly she let him go and scooted back inside, watching as he and Hop kicked the snow off their shoes before following her and shutting the door. The wood stove was burning hotly, the small cabin cozy and completely spotless, thanks to her incessant cleaning the past few days.

Hop turned as he took his coat off, pulling a tupperware container out from his coat and setting it on the table. It smelled good and El sniffed curiously, wondering what it was. Mike had taken off his shoes and hung his coat, looking around and taking in the interior of the cheery, if not tiny, cabin.

It had the one room, El's room, the living area big enough for the one couch and the TV, Hopper's bed tucked to the side between there and the kitchen, the "bathroom" just a tub and toilet with a sliding accordion door for privacy. The table only had two chairs but Hop opened up a trap door in the floor and pulled out a camp chair, quickly unfolding it and setting it on the third side of the table.

He did all of this quickly and quietly, not really sure what to say to

the new occupant in their humble abode and not really wanting to try. El took over.

“What’s that?” She glanced at the tupperware and Mike moved closer to her.

“Oh, my mom sent some casserole. It’s tater tot, with like mushrooms and stuff. It’s really good.”

“Tay... tay-ter... tot?” Her brow scrunched.

“They’re like... tiny mashed up potato pieces, but fried and crispy,” his brows raised and he smiled encouragingly. “You’ll like it. It’s one of my favorites.”

“Come and sit down, kiddos. I had to smell it the whole drive here and I’m hungry,” Hop rumbled, taking his usual seat on the one side of the table.

They did, El taking her spot and Mike settling into the camp chair as Hop doled out the food onto the mismatched plates. There were cups and milk and they ate in silence, the whole thing still a bit... awkward.

El didn’t really know what “awkward” was, but she knew she felt weird and uncomfortable, unused to the feeling and uncertain of why it quivered her stomach. Hop stared down at his plate, Mike too, and she glanced between them, trying to read whatever emotion was plaguing the atmosphere and making her squirm.

But she was already bad at words and there was no way she was going to find any now, staying quiet and taking her first bite of the casserole. Her eyes widened. It was *amazing*.

She shoveled down the rest of it, pausing to savor it now and then, closing her eyes and sighing. When she got to the last bite she let out a tiny noise of disappointment, setting down her fork. There was a scuffling sound as two different plates were pushed towards her and she looked up.

Mike and Hop glanced at each other, both of their plates being offered to her, their casserole half-eaten. Mike beat Hop, pushing the

rest of his food onto her dish.

“Here, El, you can have the rest of mine. There’s more in my fridge I can have tomorrow,” he smiled brightly again, always so warm and encouraging. “Leftovers are always better anyways. Maybe I can bring more next time.”

Hop squinted at the mention of “next time” but neither of the kids noticed, El’s face lighting up as she flashed Mike a smile so bright he blinked, feeling dazed at how pretty she was.

Way better than Christmas, he thought.

“Thank you,” she grinned, before digging in again.

Mike leaned back in his borrowed chair and looked down with a smile, obviously feeling satisfied with himself. Hop gave him another glance but said nothing, finishing his own food and then sitting back in the chair and waiting as El chewed and Mike fiddled with the edge of the sweater he was wearing. He’d brought his backpack and it was sitting next to him, leaning against the table, holding his pajamas and toothbrush and few extra things he’d brought.

El finished her food, swallowing the last bite and the second she’d set her fork down for the second time, Hopper cleared his throat. Both of the children looked at him, faces innocent, eyes wide, and he sighed, feeling woefully unprepared for this situation.

She had only been in the real world for that one week a year and a half ago but had somehow acquired a boyfriend and he realized after this he was going to have to ask Joyce for some advice because he felt totally clueless. They were just kids but they were teenagers too and he remembered being almost fourteen. The feelings. The angst. The hormones.

“Okay. We’re going to set some basic... rules. Not stupid ones.”

El smirked softly and he let himself smirk back.

“Wheeler, most of these are for you, so listen up,” Hopper’s voice was gruff again and Mike sat up a bit, brows peaked. “You and the Byers and your sister are the only ones who know where this place is and

we want to keep it that way. I know your parents are clueless and that's fine but you can't be showing your buddies how to get here. Get it?"

"Y-Yes, sir," he mumbled with a sigh.

"I know they miss her too but you... you're her *present* and if I hear about you bringing anyone here without my permission I'll call your parents and tell them I caught you vandalizing Eleanor Gillespie's house and you'll be grounded until you graduate high school," he set his jaw. "I'm serious. I'll personally tell your mom. You won't see daylight for years."

El frowned at the threat but Hop crossed his arms, face deadly serious and she backed down. It was important and she knew Mike was bad at following rules sometimes. But this was about keeping her safe and there was no doubt in her mind that he would obey.

"I'm *trusting* you, kid. I didn't tell you about her before but now you know and you can stay as long as you don't—"

"I won't tell Dustin or Lucas. Will doesn't really remember where this place is anyways. I won't do anything stupid, okay?" Mike sounded offended which was fair. "I don't want those government assholes taking her away either. I'll keep my mouth shut."

"Good. Second rule: no funny business. I know you're... young and —" he faltered, reaching up and rubbing his eyes, feeling stupid. "Just... you're kids and you're in my house and I won't put up with anything so watch yourselves."

"Funny... business?"

El's voice was soft and she looked between Mike's reddening face and Hop's exasperated expression, waiting for someone to explain what she didn't understand. They were both silent and Mike's lips twitched, like he wanted to tell her but couldn't make himself. Hop sighed.

"I know you two are... close. That's fine. But you keep your distance. I'm going to be *right there*," he pointed at his bed, "the entire night."

So nothing... nothing..." he huffed, at a loss for words. "Just keep the kissing at the school dance and not here, got it?"

Mike was a tomato, sputtering something that sounded like "Y-yes, sir" and El looked confused still. Kissing was nice... they'd only done it a few times but she liked it and didn't understand why it wasn't allowed now. Wasn't that one of the reasons he came to see her? Because he liked her—not as a friend? Kissing was just part of that... right?

"Why?" she asked, her face a picture of innocence.

"Because it's... that stuff—" Hopper tugged at his hair, definitely wishing he'd called Joyce before this discussion. "It leads places I'm not ready for you two to go. You're just kids so... keep it out of here. I want you to have fun tonight since it's your Christmas wish or whatever but I'm not... I am sure as hell not ready for that."

"Oh."

That made enough sense, she supposed, but she wasn't entirely sure what he meant by "it leads places" deciding she would listen and obey this once since it meant Mike could be here at all. Kissing could wait if it meant she got to see him.

"Okay," she nodded agreeably, unfazed by the discussion. "TV now?"

She stood, grabbing Mike's, leading him to the single couch and settling onto it, looking up at him expectantly as she switched it on with her mind. He glanced nervously at Hopper, but the older man was gathering the plates and heading for the sink, his lecture apparently over.

"Mike. Sit. We can watch. There's the talking car!"

It was Knight Rider, but she could never remember the names, just the characters and what happened and that it was her favorite. She liked that the car talked and helped save the day and Mike—with one final glance at Hop—sat down next to her. He was tense but she didn't notice, pulling her legs up underneath her and leaning back, against his shoulder, letting her hand find his and pulling it into her

lap, curling up on his side.

Behind them Hop turned the sink on and Mike relaxed a bit, squeezing her fingers and shifting so her knee wasn't digging into his thigh, scooting back so she fit into his side better as David Hasselhoff hit the gas and sent the Trans Am squealing off along the road on screen. Her breath was warm on his shoulder and he felt every muscle in his body relax as she nestled further into him.

This wasn't kissing so it was allowed, right?

They just watched, the entire episode, quietly enjoying just being around each other as her guardian did the dishes and then settled onto his bed with a magazine, letting the kids have their space. When it was over Mike perked up.

"I, um, I brought you some presents. For Christmas. Did you want them now?"

She frowned. "I didn't... I don't have anything. For you."

"Oh, that's okay," he quickly assured her, eyes honest as he nodded. "You can't go to the store anyways. My gift—er gifts, I guess, um, they're kind of dumb..."

He got up and she reluctantly released his hand as he went over and grabbed his backpack, settling down again with it between them. She turned more sideways, adjusting the TV volume with her mind and watching curiously as he unzipped it, pushing his clothes to the side and reaching down.

She blinked at what he pulled out, staring at the badly wrapped present. It was more of a lump rolled up in shiny, silver paper and when she took it from him it started making a strange noise. She almost dropped it in surprise but he pushed it towards her encouragingly and she started to rip the paper off, feeling a thrill of excitement.

Her face lit up as she unwrapped the tiny plastic dinosaur.

"Um, I don't know if you remember but—" Mike started to say.

“Roar.... Rory?”

It was one of the memories she'd clung to, when he'd showed her around his house. At the time the dinosaur hadn't interested her in the slightest but now she turned it over and pressed the button on the back, smiling as it roared.

“My mom, um, she keeps wanting me to get rid of all my old toys but I kept that one... I thought you might like it.”

“Yes,” she nodded, setting Rory into her lap happily.

“Um, and then...” he dug some more. “I brought these too.”

These weren't wrapped, too small and numerous for him to try and he held them out to her in his hands. It was the D&D figurines.

“I got new ones for Christmas this year since these ones are kind of banged up. We don't play D&D as much anymore, the guys like to go the arcade...” he sounded a bit sad. “But, I dunno, I was hoping maybe you could join sometime. I'll teach you—I, um, made you a character, you're a mage and—”

“Mage?” Her brow furrowed.

“It's like... you're the most powerful magic user in our party, um...” His fingers found a cloaked figure with a staff, showing it to her. “It's dumb, sorry.”

“No, not dumb,” her fingers caressed the tiny figure. “I'm a... mage? I can do magic?”

He grinned. “Yeah, I mean, nothing as cool as what you can do in real life but...” his eyes filled with hope. “Maybe when you can leave again, I'll plan another campaign and we'll show you how to play.”

“Yes,” she touched each piece. “You?”

“Me? Oh,” he picked up a tiny knight. “I'm a paladin. Will is our cleric, Lucas is our ranger and Dustin is our bard.”

“Pala-din?” She sounded out the word carefully.

He handed her the piece and she stared down at it, turning it over and over in her hands, gentle as if it was actually a tiny Mike. Her fist closed around it carefully, her thumb rubbing against the worn spot on the bottom.

“Yeah, like a soldier kind of, um, but a good one. They’re lawful good. I’d show you the page if I had my binder...” he muttered. “It explains better.”

“Show me when I play,” she assured him.

It was a solid plan and she nodded, excited at the thought. But there were still three hundred and forty-two days until then and she sighed, feeling confined again. She was glad to be home, to be safe, and that her friends were safe too but... staying there for another year was going to be hard now that she had tasted freedom.

“And then... the last thing, um,” he was nervous, fingers twitching as he reached into his backpack again. “It’s new, um, not hand-me-downs... I just saw it at Melvald’s and thought you’d like it.”

He pulled out a square box, much more neatly wrapped and handed it to her. She didn’t hesitate this time, ripping the crinkly paper off with a sort of unbridled joy. Presents were definitely fun.

“My mom wrapped that one. She found it and thought I got it for Nancy but um, it was actually for you. I told her I lost it... I’m not sure if she believed me,” he twitched, watching as she nervously pulled the gift from the box.

It was a scarf. Soft and pink, pink like the color of the dress she wore the first time he’d called her pretty. At each end was a ridiculous yarn pom-pom with sky blue and lilac strings, the whole thing looking kind of like a pastel slug. Her fingers ran over it as she pulled it out, touching the soft fabric before bringing it up to her face and pressing it to her cheek.

It smelled like him, that odd mix of pencil shavings and laundry detergent and stale gym socks that was maybe kind of gross but she just found to be comforting. What thirteen (almost fourteen) year old boy smelled good anyways? It made the scarf even better.

“Do you, um, like it?” He frowned. “I mean, I know you can’t really go outside so I guess it’s kind of useless. Sorry. It was a stupid idea I can always take it back if—”

Her hand covered his mouth, silencing his doubts, her eyes glowing.

“It’s... bitchin’.”

She still hadn’t quite understood that the word meant more than just “nice” or “awesome”, but Mike broke out into a relieved smile. He always understood what she meant.

“I just... I thought you’d like the color.”

“Yes. It’s pink. I like it.”

She’d learned her colors and had always felt drawn to the soft shade, the same color as the walls in the empty nursery she had never had the chance to use at Mama’s house, a broken piece of her past. The color of the dress she’d worn when she’d changed her future from being a test subject to a human being. The color of her face now as she blinked at Mike smiled fondly, burying her nose into the scarf to hide her face, feeling strangely shy.

“Thank you, Mike,” she said, voice muffled.

At first she’d been terrible at saying thank you but she was getting better, wanting him to know that she loved the gift. It really was perfect, if not simple, and she gathered the collection of items and stood.

“My room,” she looked towards the open door. “Come see.”

He stood, throwing another cautious glance towards Hop, who pretended like he didn’t notice. Of course she was going to show him her room. But that door was going to stay open.

“Help me?” she asked as they walked in.

She meant finding places to put her new belongings. The room was fairly bare, the full-size bed and side table with it’s lamp taking up one side. There was a dresser and a closet but she didn’t have a

whole lot other than the beat-up teddy bear sitting on the quilt on the bed. Mike made a mental note that she liked stuffed animals before moving towards her dresser.

“Over here?”

He arranged the D&D figurines in a semicircle on top of the dresser, setting Rory at the end and then turned to see El beaming happily behind him. She liked the doo-dads, how they filled the space, and set the scarf next to them, folding it carefully.

“I like your room,” he said softly.

“Me too.”

She plopped onto the bed, flopping back onto it and shuddering happily at how comfortable it was. Compared to the cold white sheets and sterile tile walls of her last room... this was heaven. And it definitely beat living in the woods. Mike carefully sat down on the other side.

“I like the Christmas lights too. Did you do that?”

“Hop. But I helped...” she trailed off, a question filling her mind. “What is Christmas?”

“Um, I told you, it’s when you give presents—”

“Why?”

He realized she didn’t want to know *what* you did on Christmas, but why Christmas was celebrated at all. Scooting so his back was resting against the headboard he thought for a moment.

“It has something to do with Jesus, I’m pretty sure. We only go to church on Easter and Christmas but...” his brow furrowed. “It’s when Jesus was born so we celebrate, I guess. I don’t really know why.”

“Jesus?”

Oh hell.

Mike felt himself break out in a sweat. He had no idea how to explain that. Religion. Jesus. God. Of course she wouldn't know about any of that, but he did not feel like the right person to try and explain. Maybe the pastor at his church could help her? He tried anyways.

"It's... he was this guy who lived a long time ago and—"

"El."

Hop's voice startled them and they looked over where he was standing in the doorway, arms crossed. Mike shrunk back, looking guilty but the older man's eyes were fixed strongly on his daughter.

"You remember those fairytales? Uh, Cinderella, Princess and the Pea, Snow White..."

Her eyes brightened. "Yes!"

She liked those stories.

"Jesus is kind of like one of those. He did things and helped people and died to save... uh, the world I guess?" He huffed. "Some people believe it's true and celebrate when he's born. You don't have to believe it if you don't want. But, uh, if you want to, uhhh... I'll get you a bible or something," he muttered the ending to himself, figuring it was her choice but feeling useless.

He was pretty open minded but after Sara's death he hadn't been too keen on the idea of some loving sentient being in the sky. But if she decided it was something she wanted to pursue... he would have to figure something out. Maybe see a priest or something? He rubbed his temples.

"Like a fairytale?" she asked, interest piqued.

"Yeah, there's a whole book about it. It's kind of long. Doesn't have any pictures and there's lot of tiny words that don't make sense."

She grimaced. "No."

That settled it and Hop turned to leave before remembering something.

“Did you two want to decorate the tree? I figured we’d save it so it was... Christmas,” he shrugged. “I brought tinsel.”

“Oh, El, did you want to do that? I can show you how,” Mike started to get up and she quickly followed him.

“Yes!”

They went into the main room where the tiny tree was shoved into the corner out of sight. Hop grabbed the box of glass ornaments and he and Mike took turns showing her how to decorate the small pine. The tinsel was fascinating and it soon turned into a war, all three ending up with the sparkly plastic in their hair.

The rest of the evening was spent in a similar fashion as El showed Mike how to make chocolate chip cookies and they watched another TV program, circling the cabin several times and just enjoying each other’s company. Mike slowly relaxed as Hopper refrained from whipping out his shotgun every time he was near El and soon began to tease her as they made the cookies, flicking flour at each other and stealing bits of dough. The hours passed too quickly and it was time to sleep, the sun long gone and all three of them yawning widely. El appeared with the extra pillow from her bed as Hop dug out some blankets, handing them over to Mike as he settled onto the couch.

Soon enough everyone was tucked in, El’s door open and Hopper passed out in his bed, his snoring filling the cabin. He was a pretty heavy sleeper, she’d learned, and somehow she slept better the nights he was there, sawing logs outside of her room.

Tonight she felt strangely restless, her usually comfortable bed feeling... empty. Her teddy bear was cuddled to her chest, her quilt pulled up around her shoulders, her pajamas soft and warm but something just felt off. The cabin was dark and she could hear Mike shuffling around on the couch before settling.

She couldn’t help it.

Pushing her covers off she swung her feet over the side of the bed, creeping silently across the floor, a shadow in the dark. She stood next to the couch, where Mike lay away from her, facing the back.

Her fingers were gentle as she tapped his shoulder, leaning down close to his ear.

“Mike.”

It was the slightest whisper but he rolled over, squinting in the dark, half asleep.

“El?” A yawn. “You okay?”

“Come here.”

He sat up, confused, and she grabbed his wrist and pulled him up, off the couch, his blanket falling to the floor. She wrapped her arms around his chest and hugged him, not really knowing why but just wanting to be close. He made her feel different, her stomach shivery—like when she ate too much ice cream—but good at the same time. And when he kissed her it was like sparks of fire, shooting through her entire body.

His arms went around her and she sighed and pressed her face against his neck, standing still and just breathing him in. It was impossible to know when she would get to see him next and she wanted to appreciate having him there as much as she could.

After a second she pulled back, her hand reaching for his and leading him around the obstacles in the living room, making sure to be quiet as they crept back into her room. Her eyes had adjusted and the glow from the fire in the stove helped her to see his face as he stopped her next to her bed.

“El,” he whispered. “What are you doing?”

“Stay.” It was a plea as she pointed at her small mattress. “Here.”

“But Hop will—”

“No kissing, Mike. Just sleep. It’s okay.”

She couldn’t see his face burning, not realizing how her words a double meaning. She just wanted him to hold her, figuring that was allowed, but since kissing wasn’t she wouldn’t do that. It would be

okay... right? No funny business.

“Um... are you sure? He’ll throw me out the door,” Mike worried, glancing out the door like the older man would appear any second and pulverize him.

“No. I won’t let him.”

When it came down to it she was much scarier than Hop and he felt safe knowing that she would protect him if the Chief did decide to blow a gasket. And truth be told, he wanted the same thing, to just be close to her for a little longer, before the morning came and he had to go back. He didn’t know if he’d be allowed to visit any time soon and wanted to make the most of their “Christmas” together. It was just cuddling, he wasn’t going to try and make it something more.

“Okay...” he gave in. “But if he tries to shoot me you have to keep me safe.”

“I promise.”

She snuggled into her bed again, and he went around the side. It was a full size mattress, just big enough for them to both fit comfortably, wider than his twin at home. He was tentative as he crawled under the covers, feeling a bit awkward and not really knowing how close she wanted him to be. That question was quickly answered as her hand snagged his wrist and tucked it around her torso, over the blanket, her fingers tangling with his as she sighed happily, pulling him closer so they almost touched. Much better.

“I don’t want to leave tomorrow,” he murmured, his breath tickling the back of her hair. “I’m going to miss you so much.”

“You’ll come back. I’ll ask again,” she said confidently.

There wasn’t a good reason why he couldn’t—other than Hop just saying no—but now that he’d given in the once she knew it would be easy to break her father down again. Or she hoped, anyways. Not seeing Mike was worse than anything.

“How many?” she breathed.

"It's after midnight now so... three hundred and forty-one," he answered, immediately knowing what she meant.

A sigh. "Too many."

"I know. But we can make it. I can wait," his voice dropped, softer and more breathy. "I'll wait for you forever, El."

She didn't have a response, but warmth filled her chest and traveled down to her toes, a smile he couldn't see curving her lips. Somehow his words always made her feel amazing and happy and she snuggled closer to him to show him she understood what he meant.

It was quiet as he inhaled, something foreign filling the air around them as El's hand squeezed his, letting out a sigh. She didn't know what it was but it was warm and safe and she felt it a lot more now that she was out of the lab. Hop made her feel it when he teased her and took care of her. She'd felt it when she'd hugged her friends and Joyce. And Mike made her feel it most of all, sometimes as dull ache in her chest and other times a sunburst that consumed her.

Whatever it was, she liked it. A lot.

Mike was puzzling about it too, knowing the word but thinking it was too serious for something that felt so simple with her. That word, that one that complicated things, that people said was crazy, couldn't be the same soft feeling that lay between them.

Her fingers stroked his own in her palm and he could smell the woodsmoke and florally shampoo scent in her hair that almost brushed his nose. Inhaling he squeezed her hand once, eyelids fluttering as the comfy position and feeling of contentment filled him. Whatever it was, whatever name it had, he knew she was the only one who made him feel like that, and he savored the moment as he drifted off.

El felt him go, her own heart rate slowing as his fingers twitched against hers, his breath warm on the back of her neck. She closed her eyes, hearing the snores of her father who kept her safe floating in through her door, feeling the warmth of the boy who made her heart flutter against her back and deciding she could never feel this happy.

A smile quirked her lips as she fell asleep.

&&&

Hop snorted awake, the sun bright against the curtains, letting him know it was mid-morning. The cabin still smelled like cookies and he rubbed his eyes before sitting up, looking around and immediately spotting the unfamiliar shoes and jacket by the door, his cop instincts zeroing in before he remembered their guest.

Oh right. Wheeler.

He turned towards the couch, feeling an unexpected bolt of panic when he realized it was empty, the blankets on the floor. His feet hit the floor and he staggered across the chilly floorboards to the only room, afraid that the bed there would be empty too.

The opposite was true and he narrowed his eyes, preparing to stomp in and shake the two kids awake and possibly throw Wheeler out of the nearest window. But he paused, blinking, and observed them instead.

There wasn't any "funny business", he realized, the arm that wrapped around her waist in plain sight with their fingers tangled, Mike's chin barely pressing against her shoulder blade as he slept, nothing outrightly inappropriate or worrying. The kid looked peaceful, his eyes moving under his lids as he dreamed. But it was *her* face that kept Hop from finding his gun. He usually woke her up most days so he was used to the relaxed face she made as she slept.

This was different. He wasn't sure how, but she looked like she was... smiling. The strong paternal urge to murder calmed and with a sigh he stepped back. It was innocent, two kids sharing a bed because they wanted to be close and nothing more. He supposed she didn't really understand what sleeping with someone you liked meant, the innocence apparent as she twitched in her sleep and Mike responded with a similar twitch, fingers squeezing lightly, as if to comfort her.

Damn it, this wasn't supposed to be cute, he grumped. I'm supposed to hold the shotgun and chase him out when he takes it too far.

But it *was* innocent and he realized that it wouldn't stay that way forever, deciding that they could have their moment this time. The rules would be a little stricter next time but this once... *just* this once... he'd let them get away with it.

Glancing at her dresser he saw the gifts, placed with care, and tried to squelch the tide of anxiety as the reality of how quickly she was growing up hit him. That one thing he couldn't stop, that one thing that made him want to lock her up in safety forever, where there weren't mean girls and asshole guys and teachers and homework and stress.

She's dealt with enough shit, can she get a break on this one? He sighed.

But at least if she was going to go off into the world in—what did the kid say? Three hundred and forty something days?—If she was going to get thrown into the real world of high school and bullies and stress—different from the hell she'd escaped from but somehow more intimidating—at least she would have someone loyal and caring to help guide her. The times he couldn't be there, couldn't let his fatherly instinct take over or force his way into whatever angsty teenage bullshit she had to go through... at least she would have Mike.

He was a good kid when it came down to it. Hotheaded and impulsive, for sure, but Hop knew there wasn't anything he wouldn't do for her.

I don't have to like it but at least he's good for her.

With a final conflicted glance he nodded, letting the sleeping kids rest and heading for the kitchen to start breakfast.

The sounds caused El to stir and despite the new situation she didn't startle, feeling calmer than she'd ever felt, the arm across her waist heavy and reassuring. She knew where she was and who was with her and she smiled, gently pulling her hand out of Mike's grip and rolling over to face him.

He was out cold, drooling onto the pillow and she stifled a giggle.

Mouthbreather. Literally.

She could hear Hop, smell something sizzling on the stove and decided that she had to break the rule just once, scooting forward and gently pressing her lips against the ones in front of her, watching as his eyelids fluttered, the arm around her waist squeezing like a reflex. His lips moved against hers as he woke up a bit and after a moment she pulled back, her hands cupping his cheeks.

“Mmmnnnph...” he groaned and opened his eyes sleepily. “El?”

“Hi, Mike,” she smiled.

“What’s... I—” he almost sat bolt upright as he realized his position and it was only her hands on his cheeks that kept him down next to her as he caught his bearings. He licked his lips as he remembered where he was and how he got there. “Um, good morning?”

“Sleep... well?”

“I slept great actually—”

There was a crash from the kitchen followed by some rather colorful language and at that Mike sat up all the way, remembering the potential danger he was in, his eyes wide in alarm.

I’m so dead.

“El, Hopper is—”

“Making breakfast,” she sat up and stretched, completely unconcerned. “Hungry?”

“I guess but—”

“No worrying, remember? I’ll keep you safe,” she poked him in the shoulder, another smile playing at her lips.

“B-But he probably saw us,” Mike sputtered, imagining the Chief with the rifle he’d had at the Byers’.

“Yes,” she nodded in agreement.

“And... I’m still alive?”

“Yes?”

Her brows furrowed like she couldn’t understand why he wouldn’t be. Shotguns and boyfriends didn’t have a connection in her mind. She pouted, not liking that he was worrying so much, reaching out and pushing at his cheeks, trying to make him smile.

“Not happy?”

His hands covered hers and he pulled them away from his face, shaking his head, the barest hint of a smile on his face.

“No, I’m happy! Super happy. I get to be here with you. I’m just... nervous.”

“Why?”

“Because... Hopper could like, murder me at any second if I get too close to you and that kind of freaks me out.”

She frowned. “Murder you? Because... too close? Because of me?”

“No, like...” he sighed, frustrated that he couldn’t explain. “When people like each other like we like each other stuff can happen that’s not... it’s not, um... appropriate?”

“Uh-pro-pree-ett?”

“Yeah, like manners, you know?”

Between him and Hop and the TV, she’d learned the basics of manners, nodding as he continued his explanation.

“There are things that are and aren’t okay depending on where you are or who you’re with. You do that kind of stuff in certain situations and certain places. And um, us kissing and stuff is... not appropriate sometimes. Like when we’re around him. It’s a private thing but not like—I don’t know... does that make sense?” He was red again.

“So we’re... not appro-pro-pirate?” She tilted her head.

“No!” He flushed even harder, ignoring her blunder. “We are, but like... we could... not be?”

They were both sitting up in the bed, El tucking her feet under her and staring at him, trying to make sense of his words. She’d learned a lot from watching TV and started to connect the dots. The things people in her soaps did only when they were alone, kissing and... other things. Things that made her face heat up.

“Oh,” her eyes widened. “Hopper thinks... we do that?”

“No, I mean, he might but we don’t and—”

“Okay. I understand. Appro-prius.”

“Appropriate,” he corrected.

“A—Appropriate,” she tried again, eyes squinted up. “We’ll be appropriate for Hopper. So he doesn’t hurt you because of me.”

It was the basic concept and he let out a breath of relief, glad that she was at least trying to understand his anxiety. He wanted to live and she couldn’t be doing things in front of her dad that might make him go postal. And if he was being honest with himself, he didn’t even really know what those things were... he just knew better than to try any time soon.

“Cool,” he smiled, his eyes crinkling and her heart sped up.

“Cool,” she agreed.

They just stared at each other for a minute, smiling stupidly and then Mike ducked his head and looked away, turning red and reaching for her hand to squeeze it.

“I liked sleeping with you.”

“I liked it too. I wish you could stay.”

“Me too.”

The comfortable silence was back and then there was the sound of

another crash from the kitchen and more swearing. El turned to look towards the noise, eyes fond, and Mike leaned forward and pecked her lips while she was distracted, scrabbling out of the bed and running away like he was afraid Hop would appear in the doorway and start yelling about breaking rules if he didn't physically remove himself from the room.

He was gone, making a beeline for the "bathroom", closing the sliding accordion door and El blinked, a small smile quirking her mouth, the ghost of his lips warming her own. With a sigh she got up too, walking out of the room to the kitchen and coming up behind her father, sniffing.

"I got bacon," he said casually without turning around. "I know it's been a while. Eggos are in the toaster if you want to butter them up."

It was the usual morning routine and she did as he suggested, putting in a third Eggo for their guest and digging for a clean butter knife. The door opened and Mike appeared, looking nervous again. El smiled warmly and he came closer, glancing at Hopper's figure.

"Do you need help?" he asked.

"Nah. We've got it down. You can sit, kid," Hop said. A calculated pause. "How did you sleep?"

"Um." Mike was red in an instant. "Great. How about—"

Hopper turned, holding up his spatula and making eye contact with both of them slowly, face serious.

"Next time," he weighed his words, gesturing between the two of them with the kitchen utensil which made him slightly less threatening, "he stays on the couch. Got it?"

"Next time?" El's face lit up. "He can come back?"

"Yeah, this worked alright, I guess. It's not going to be a weekly thing, okay? We're not a damn bed and breakfast." He crossed his arms. "But I don't want you running off and getting yourself in trouble because you... miss each other or whatever. It's easier if he comes here now and then. But..." He cleared his throat. "Those rules

I made? They get *stricter*. I mean it.”

His eyes narrowed and he turned his glare onto Mike. Out of the two of them he was the most likely to listen and even though he'd been a bit soft on the kid since he'd let him believe she was gone or dead, this was non-negotiable.

I had to adopt a goddamn teenager, he grumbled as he stared the boy down.

“Y-Yes, sir,” Mike gulped.

“Good,” he turned back to his eggs. “You can set the table if you want.”

Breakfast—or brunch, really—went by too quickly, the three talking about the episode of Knight Rider they'd watched the night before and what Mike was doing for New Year's Eve. That was another explanation, why people celebrated the beginning of the new year. His mother always hosted a party at their house, inviting neighbors and his friend's families to countdown the final hours.

“Maybe, you can come next year, El,” Mike seemed optimistic, throwing a glance at Hop. “Both of you. My mom always make a ton of food and Mrs. Byers comes with Will and it's kind of fun because we get to hang out in the basement while the adults are upstairs getting drunk.”

“Drunk?”

Another explanation for El, but Mike never tired of her questions, answering each one with an endless amount of patience that Hop was surprised the kid had. He knew he had a temper. But not with her.

He knew they had to say goodbye soon feeling a bit loathsome to split them up again but knowing it was necessary. Maybe Mike could come back after New Year's... didn't the middle school get some president's birthday off or something? It was good for her to have company. Even if it made Hop sweat.

“Alright, kids. I've got to take him back,” he drawled, reaching for the dishes.

There was an immediate sob and he looked up, alarmed, to see El crying, tears pouring down her face.

How the hell did she start crying so fast?

"El, it's okay," Mike was immediately there, handing her a napkin. "Don't cry, I'll come back and we can talk tonight on the Supercoms if you want."

"But you won't be *here*," she sniffled.

Clearly he was struggling with his own sadness, but he was too focused on trying to cheer her up to notice. She wiped at her tears, looking down, like she was ashamed for being so emotional.

"I can come back, remember? I'll be here again soon. It'll be okay," his eyes were wet. "We made it three hundred and fifty-three days without talking and now we *can* talk. It won't be worse. It won't be like that again because I know you're safe and you know I can hear you."

Hop didn't want to interrupt what he supposed was a sweet moment but couldn't help it, wanting her to stop crying. On the list of things he didn't like, seeing her cry was close to the damn top.

"Look, kid," he was talking to El this time. "If you cry every time he comes over it's going to make me hesitate to let him come back. I told you, he'll visit again. You two aren't Romeo and Juliet, you're allowed to see each other as long as it's *safe*," he reminded her. "I don't want those bad guys coming back and going after your boy, here. So he has to stay away for a bit."

"Safe," she whispered, eyes staring at nothing.

"And you have to stay safe too, El," Mike's hand was holding hers. "I told you, I'll wait forever."

Hop rolled his eyes.

"Jesus, don't be dramatic, Wheeler. It's just a year. Less, if we're lucky."

He stood up and Mike followed reluctantly, his hand slipping from El's as they headed for the door, putting their coats and shoes back on. She stared for a moment, wiping the last of the tears from her eyes before getting back up and disappearing into her room. After a moment she reappeared, holding something.

She reached for him, hugging him tightly and he fell against her, his arms gripping her so tight she almost couldn't breathe. Hop looked away, allowing the goodbye and trying to let them have their moment.

"I'll come back, El. I promise."

"Promise," she repeated, making it a statement and not a question.

When she pulled back her hand slipped into his, pressing something small into his palm. Looking down he realized it was the tiny mage figurine he'd given her, the meaning clear as she showed him the paladin she was clutching tightly in her other fist.

"So you have me," she whispered. "Until you come back."

He knew Hopper was right there watching him but his fear of a painful death seemed less important than showing her how he felt and he reached for her, pulling her close and closing his eyes as he pressed his lips to her. She was stiff for a second, surprised, but relaxed against him, her hand on his cheek as she kissed him back, not wanting the moment to end.

"Hey!" Hop yelped.

They jumped apart, El sheepish, Mike guilty, and the chief crossed his arms, looking thoroughly annoyed.

"S-Sorry," Mike stuttered, the terror back.

"It was just goodbye," El tried to reason, suddenly defiant. "Not funny business. Just goodbye."

"Hmph, that's how it *starts*," Hopper shook his head. "Come on, kid. We have to get you to over to Joyce's."

He pushed past them onto the porch, the chilly December air making El shiver, but she caught Mike's hand as he turned to follow, pulling him back for one last, quick hug. There wasn't a whole lot to say after the kiss but she sighed, breathing him in, and trying to memorize the sound his voice and the smell of his skin and just how warm he made her feel. To hold her over until next time.

When he pulled back she could tell he'd done the same thing, looking torn as he realized it was actually time to say goodbye.

"I'll see you soon," he promised.

"Soon," she agreed. "Bye, Mike."

"Bye, El," he murmured, stepping back, eyes sad.

The door shut between them and he was gone, the space in her chest empty, her fingers still curled around the paladin figure, the metal digging into her palm as she clung to it. A sob left her throat and she collapsed onto the couch, crying even though she knew it wouldn't help. It was more of a reaction than any sort of thought, her entire being missing him even though he wasn't that far away.

After a few more sobs she calmed, wiping her face, feeling ridiculous. Crying was dumb and made her eyes hurt but she didn't know what else to do, staring around the cabin listlessly. She was still sitting there when Hop got back and he sighed, having had a feeling.

Teenage love angst was the worst and he pulled out the strawberry ice cream he'd bought at the convenience store on a whim on the drive back, setting it into her hands before grabbing a spoon and joining her on the couch. It was Saturday, his day off, so they stayed there all day, finishing the ice cream and then the sandwiches he made them and finally the TV dinners in the freezer. She didn't move.

El was quiet, contemplative, not upset at him but just... sad. It would pass, but he let her mope, knowing getting upset wouldn't help. When she felt something, she felt it with her entire being and he'd learned that trying to change it wouldn't help. She just had to get it out of her system.

When she started to yawn he sent her to bed, walking in after she was under the covers and tucking her in, kissing her forehead before leaving her to get into his own bed.

With a sigh she rolled over to face the lamp on her side table, bring her fist up and opening it, looking down at the paladin. She'd held onto it all day, the metal warm from sitting in her palm for so long. Her bed was empty, the coziness of the night before gone, an empty space where Mike had once lay.

Her heart sighed sadly but she accepted that it had to be this way for now. Maybe someday she would get to sleep next to him every night, wake up to him every morning. That sounded so... perfect.

Her eyelids were drooping but she sat up, staring down at the figure in her palm, sighing as the ache of missing him filled her all over again. Why did it have to feel so... bad? If she liked him so much why did it hurt sometimes? She puzzled, sighing loudly again.

"Go to sleep, kid," Hop's voice drifted in from the main room. "You'll feel better in the morning when you're less sad."

"Not sad."

"Good. Go to sleep."

He was gruff, getting tired of her emotional... whatever it was.

"I... I'm alone," she said quietly. "I don't like it."

"Kid, I'm right out here. You're not alone."

There was a whimper and he sighed, getting up out of his bed *again* and walking to her room, standing in the doorway. She looked up at him and he let the irritation fade. Her face was like damn puppy he'd just punted across the room and he glanced over his shoulder towards his own sleeping area, getting an idea.

"How about... we move your bed out here. We can have a camp out in the living room so you don't have to be... alone," he sighed at the drama of the word.

“Camp out?”

“Like when you sleep out somewhere you don’t usually. Most of the time it’s actually camping, out in the woods but—” She looked alarmed at the thought of sleeping out in the woods like she had the year before. “But you can camp out in houses and backyards and stuff too. It’s... fun.”

He had a memory of Sara, the time he’d made a blanket fort for her in the living room and had ended up falling asleep in it, reading her *Anne of Green Gables*. There was that familiar bolt of pain and sweet sorrow that came with those memories and he decided it was time to make new ones.

“We could make a fort maybe—” he started.

El’s entire face lit up. “A fort?”

“Yeah, like with blankets and—”

“Yes.” She started to get out of her bed. “A fort. For the camp out.”

That settled it. It didn’t take too long for him to find every spare sheet and blanket and make a huge slanted tent from the back of the couch to the wall above his bed. Moving her bed took longer, but she helped with a few nudges and tugs of her mind and soon enough they were both laying on their respective mattresses beneath the canopy of blankets.

Hop felt a little ridiculous but the smile on her face made it worth it and he ruffled her hair as she rolled closer toward him. The sadness that had shadowed her face was gone, replaced with an excited glow as she stared around the tent, snuggling into her bed. Her hand was holding something and he squinted, wondering what it was.

She rolled over and he decided it wasn’t worth asking, reaching for the lamp that he’d set on the floor and switching it off.

“Good night, kid.”

“Night,” she said softly.

El rolled over, away from him, feeling safe and happy and less sad than she had before. The fort reminded her of sleeping in Mike's basement and somehow she missed him just a little bit less. Reaching, she gently set the tiny paladin on the pillow next to her, her fingers stroking it gently before she pulled her arm back under the blankets.

Hop started snoring behind her, the familiar sound oddly soothing as always, and she snuggled further into her pillow, closing her eyes. She was home and even though Mike was part of that she felt better knowing that soon—sort of soon—she would be able to see him every day.

Her fingers brushed the figurine one last time and she whispered softly, quiet enough that it wouldn't wake up Hop.

“Three-hundred and forty-one.”

Author's Note:

i'm not slamming religion or anything btw. i can't see hop as being religious and mike would probably be clueless so the two of them trying to explain it just seemed funny to me. no harm intended.

also i know fuck all about D&D so cut me some slack, google could only tell me so much.

idk i just like the idea of mike being allowed to stay at the cabin and it being this kind of awkward dance between the three of them where hop wants them to be together because they're happy but also he would skin mike alive if he needed too but also he would never because he's still a little guilty from keeping them apart for so long. hop is always fun to write.

still working on those other one shots but if any of you guys have prompts/requests/ideas i'd love to hear them. inspiration is a fickle thing and sometimes it sucker punches me in the form of a casual comment and i get shit done. i love love love hearing ideas and shit so hit me up.

once again, love you all (new readers and old) and i
want to hear what you have to say.

-g